

# A green tomato harvest

*Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office*



PHOTO BY Dr. William M. Johnson



November 21, 2012



Several residents who attended one of our two seminars last Saturday also toured our nearby demonstration vegetable garden in Carbide Park. Many had questions about dealing with green tomatoes late in the fall season.

Ah, the bounty to be had from a productive fall garden in the Texas Upper Gulf Coast growing region. Tomatoes produced in the fall garden will likely have plenty of fruits in various stages of maturity when a frost does come later.

You have several options when dealing with a large crop of green tomatoes. Don't

overlook the if-you-have-lemons-then-make-lemonade philosophy. If you have not tried fried green tomatoes, now would be an opportune time to do so. Although frying is not my preferred method of cooking, fried green tomatoes are a personal favorite and warrant a special exemption.

It's important to select tomatoes that are very firm and completely green. They should also be full size or near full-size as smaller green tomatoes can impart a slightly bitter taste. I like them thinly sliced with a cornmeal and flour mix crust.

It's a little disconcerting when

you first cut into a home-grown tomato and it sounds like you're cutting into a crisp apple, but that's exactly what you need for this recipe. The thought of this makes me want to go out to my garden, pick some green (but remember, full-size) tomatoes and start cooking.

Fried green tomatoes are perfect for a light lunch during the spring growing season and anytime during a pleasantly cool fall autumn day as we are having now. By the way, they are fantastic with a hint of old-school Tabasco sauce.

But I digress; this is a gardening column and not a culinary

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*News column printed in the Galveston Daily News, The Post, and other Galveston County Newspapers.*



arts column, so I must advance to the other options at hand. One option would be to pull up the whole plant, carefully shake the excess dirt off the roots and hang the plant upside down from a ceiling or wall and in a cool area (such as the garage) and then pick the tomatoes as they ripen.

Yet another option would be to pick all the immature tomatoes ahead of time should a hard frost be in the forecast. Vine-ripened tomatoes are sweetest, but tomatoes will ripen off the vine if picked green.

Green tomatoes harvested before the first frost should be individually wrapped in a sheet of newspaper and kept at 55 to 70 degrees F. Be sure to inspect twice a week for ripeness and to remove any decaying fruit. Though you will lose some, it is possible you will be eating fresh sliced tomatoes for three to five weeks afterward.

Yet another option would be to provide cold protection to tomato plants by covering plants with old bed sheets, blankets, towels or other opaque material in the evenings before a frost is expected. In fact, a heavy covering of leaves or hay on the plants can protect the fruit as well.

The upper surface of the leaves or blanket might be covered with frost in the morning, but the heat held under the leaves, hay or blanket prevents damage to the fruit. If the fruit freezes, it should be discarded.

Tomatoes can make it through a little light frost as long as it doesn't last all night. A hard frost can and will kill plants. And if the plant burns down under a hard frost, it's not likely you can save your tomatoes either.

All of this is seeing the glass as half empty as opposed to half-full. Our winter season is typically mild, and last winter

was exceptionally mild. In fact, a volunteer tomato plant sprouted in August 2011, in an ornamental bed on the south side of my office building. That makes the vine 1.25 years old now, and there were several full-size (but still green) tomatoes on it as of last Saturday.

I'm impressed but not surprised at the performance of this tomato since it is growing near a brick exterior wall. A brick wall on the south side of a building will moderate temperatures and create a slightly warmer microclimate than the general winter air, protecting the plant.

If all this discussion about use of fall tomatoes seems a bit overly focused, then you have to understand that many gardeners (myself included) find the effort to be worthwhile as a store-bought tomato cannot come close to delighting the sensory taste buds like a homegrown tomato.

If the tomato plant near my office building still has its crop of green tomatoes when I return to work today, I will be sure to stop by the grocery store on my way home after work to get some cornmeal and flour as I'm a bit low on these in the pantry. I already have a nearly full bottle of Tabasco sauce.

